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ABSTRACT

The report presents the findings of an investigation into the trends and issues concerning accreditation of professionals and institutions of higher education in the United States. In late 1988 and early 1989, the study examined the accreditation of courses in nursing, engineering, and teacher education, and the accreditation of institutions in three eastern states. Information is provided from the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, together with seven universities and colleges preparing for professional or institutional accreditation visits in 1989. Additional discussions held at other institutions and with other individuals who had experience (including at the research level) with accreditation are also provided. Although the report can provide insights that may be helpful to other countries that are moving towards the accreditation process, its primary focus is on aspects of accreditation that may be of specific interest in the United Kingdom. A brief appendix provides additional information sources concerning accreditation. Contains 36 references. (GLR)

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Accreditation: the American experience

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Accreditation: the American experience

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Foreword

This paper describes the experience of accreditation in the United States. We hope that it will contribute to discussion about the developing forms of accreditation and re-accreditation in the United Kingdom. The study on which the report is based was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out by Professors Clem Adelman and Harold Silver who also prepared this report.

Clem Adelman is professor of education at the University of Reading and Harold Silver, currently researcher and consultant, is a visiting professor at Oxford Polytechnic and senior project associate at Pennsylvania State University. We are grateful to them both for making their work available to the CNAA.

Comments on the paper are welcome and should be sent to John Brennan, Registrar for Information Services, at the CNAA.

Introduction

This report is the outcome of a project supported by the Nuffield Foundation. It was designed to investigate trends and issues in the accreditation of higher education in the United States and the researchers looked at both professional and institutional accreditation. In late 1988 and early 1989, the study examined the accreditation of courses in nursing, engineering and teacher education, and the accreditation of institutions in three Eastern states. The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (the umbrella organisation of accreditation bodies of both kinds) was visited, together with seven universities and colleges preparing for professional or institutional accreditation visits in 1989. (The institutions have all been anonymised in the report). Additional discussions were held at other institutions and with other individuals who had experience - including at the research level - of accreditation.

This project was planned against a recognition of the CNAA's own developing accreditation policy, the different realities behind the American and British conceptions, and moves towards some kind of accreditation in other European countries, in Latin America, in Hong Kong, and elsewhere. In considering the American scene, however, this report focuses on aspects of accreditation that may be of specific interest in the United Kingdom.

The authors would like to thank Dr Reyes-Guerra, Executive Director of ABET, Dr R Kunkle, Executive Director of NCATE, Dr P Moccia, Vice-President for Education and Accreditation, NLN, Dr Ted Manning, Director of COPA, Dr Bob Kirkwood, who at the time was Director of the Middle States Association, and the Presidents and other Colleagues at the seven institutions that were visited.

1: ACCREDITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Accreditation in the United States is a century-old, voluntary process intended to guarantee standards in schools and higher education. It is a two-pronged attempt by higher education institutions to demonstrate that they and their courses (or 'programmes') are accountable to some publicly credible body for the quality of their work.

There are two kinds of accreditation, independent of each other, institutional and subject. Accreditation does not cover every part of US higher education. On the one hand, not all institutions are permitted to be, or wish to be, in membership of the relevant accrediting bodies; and, on the other hand, subject or professional accreditation is not uniformly required for entry by graduates into different professions and occupations. Institutional accreditation is carried out by six regional associations, and professional accreditation by some 40 national bodies.

In addition to the formal systems of accreditation, the 50 states are engaged to various extents in monitoring the performance of the 'public' higher education institutions for which they are responsible. For the purposes of licensing graduates to enter certain professions, notably school teaching, the states also perform something similar to an accreditation function for public and private institutions alike. Some states also 'approve' institutions.

A state institution, therefore, may be institutionally accredited by the regional body, may be subject to various kinds of

national specialised accreditation, may review and report on its programmes to its state coordinating body, and may have its teacher education programme regularly reviewed by its state department of education.

Historically, accreditation in the US has been a process of self-regulation by the academic community, initially to pre-empt the imposition of federal structures of accountability. In recent decades, however, increased monitoring, coordination or control by the states of the institutions under their jurisdiction has superimposed a statutory level of accountability on this voluntary process.

The regional accreditation bodies grew in the late nineteenth century out of concerns about the variable quality of the schools from which the higher education institutions were drawing their students, and by the end of the century they were looking for a means of offering greater public assurance of the standards of their own member institutions, both at school and at college levels. In the twentieth century, both the regional accreditation bodies and the professional agencies have had to contend with the growing diversity of institutions (of which there are now more than 3000 in post-secondary education).

Today, institutions may be public or private, vast or diminutive, comprehensive or specialised, well-established or new, two-year community college or four-year college, of undoubted high quality or at the threshold of acceptance, orthodox or innovative, attracting high quality students or failing to do so, and serving elite clienteles or largely disadvantaged student populations. In these circumstances, neither professional nor institutional accreditation bodies would claim to have developed immutable measures of quality. These bodies continue to struggle to establish criteria and procedures acceptable to themselves, to the institutions and to the constituencies to which they appeal or are accountable, including students, schools, professions, employers, trustees,

boards, state and federal government, the press and public opinion.

One response of the accrediting agencies to this range of responsibilities and its attendant problems was the establishment of an overarching national machinery. A Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions in Higher Education had coexisted with a National Commission on Accrediting (NCA), which had brought together the specialised agencies'.[1] A review of the NCA in 1966 underlined that failure to coordinate accrediting activities would mean that 'accreditation increasingly will become by the very nature of their needs a function of the United States Office of Education and other federal agencies'.[2] The two bodies amalgamated in 1974 to form the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA). COPA and its associated accrediting organisations had no international parallels. For various federal funding purposes, the government has 'recognised' accreditation agencies as providing the framework within which the quality of institutions can be judged,[3] and COPA and its affiliated institutions together maintain that framework.

Accreditation is, therefore, a central feature of US higher education, a process by which institutions of all kinds seek to demonstrate that they are fit places for students, have programmes appropriate in content and at least adequate in standards. High quality institutions may not <u>need</u> accreditation as institutions, and may elect to take part either as a commitment to the system, or as simply an aid to the institution's internal process of self-monitoring and strategic planning. Whatever the motive for participation, the justification for accreditation as a system is to indicate 'a level of performance, integrity, and quality' which entitles institutions and programmes to 'the confidence of the educational community and the public they serve'.[4]

2: INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

Institutions seeking accreditation for the first time face complex procedures in order to convince the regional body that they have met the necessary standards and conditions. Thereafter, accredited institutions face a full-scale review at ten-year intervals, between which they are required to submit an interim report, and to comply with whatever conditions the previous decennial visit may have imposed (eg. supplementary documentation, or an additional visit to review progress on specific issues).

The regional accreditation bodies

While there are differences amongst the regional bodies responsible for institutional accreditation, their basic strategies are similar. The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (typical of the regional accrediting bodies) operates through an assembly of elementary schools, a commission on secondary schools and a commission on higher education - only the last of which concerns us here. This commission is headed by a 24-member board, and has a staff of six. Some 500 institutions of higher education are in membership, of which some 300 play a regular part in the commission's work, attending regional meetings or workshops and taking part in the work of the board and annual meetings. Smaller institutions tend to devote more time and attention to the Association than do the larger universities, though the level of participation by the latter has been increasing in recent years.

The main purpose of the commission's work is encapsulated (as with other regional bodies) in a published statement entitled Characteristics of Excellence: Standards for Accreditation, first issued in 1982. Primarily, its discussion focuses on 'quality' and its characteristics. Its definition of the quality and characteristics of 'superior educational institutions' includes:

> clearly stated mission, goals and objectives; humane and non-discriminatory policies in dealing with students, staff and faculty; courses which develop abilities to form independent judgement, weigh values, understand fundamental theory and, where appropriate, are attuned to professional or occupational requirements; curricula which provide a general or liberal education; (and) an atmosphere conducive to broadening the student's education beyond the minimum level necessary to obtain credits, certificates or degrees.

Other items in the statement are a suitable faculty, staff development, appropriate student services, administration which supports teaching and learning, a capacity for institutional self-study, suitable physical facilities and resources, and respect for the public interest and honest public relations. Strong emphasis is placed on the 'astuteness with which (an institution) has identified its task'. The statement then turns into a handbook of characteristics, elaborating how Middle States views the excellence of an institution, and therefore the directions in which self-study might point. At the heart of judgement is a cluster of questions about an institution's effectiveness:

> Has it clearly defined goals which are appropriate to higher education?
>
> Does it have programs and the human and other resources to attain them?

> Does it provide an environment conducive to their attainment?
>
> How well does it achieve them?[5]

Middle States issues regular statements on all aspects of institutional practice and procedures likely to figure in the evaluation process, from general education requirements to study abroad programmes and the hiring of consultants. Its main aim, though, is to strengthen the institutions' self-review process:

> A Middle States evaluation is a long-range process designed to help an institution analyse its functions, appraise its educational effectiveness, and discover means by which its work can be strengthened. Accreditation is involved, but as a byproduct rather than as the primary factor.[6]

The typical rhythm of Middle States' procedure is for a staff member to visit the institution some two years before a visit is scheduled, to meet with the institution's president and various groups to ensure clarity about the accreditation process. The institution is left to design a self-study (see below), and a target date for the visit is subsequently agreed. The chair of the visiting panel and then the team members are selected: the smallest in 1988 was 4-5 people and the largest (at the request of a university with a multi-campus operation) was 39. Middle States' liaison officer is involved in the planning, but not in the preliminary visit by the chair or in the main visit. The final report is received by a committee of the Commission for Higher Education, which forwards its response and a recommendation to the Commission. The Commission then acts on the recommendations from the visiting team and the committee, reaffirming accreditation (subject to any conditions), or asking the institution to show cause by a specific date why

accreditation should not be removed. This set of procedures is broadly similar in other regions.

Institutional case studies

The four institutions chosen to visit for this project had review visits scheduled in 1989, and represented a range of institutions by size, location, funding (public or private) and likely approach to the accreditation process. All four institutions fall under the auspices of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Their preparations for the review, though, reflected their separate concerns and approaches.

Midtown University, a large state institution with over 30,000 students, had judged its previous accreditation event to be irrelevant to its needs and had agreed with Middle States a different approach for this visit. It was to be based on the university's two-year old development plan and its request that the review should focus on a small cluster of themes. **Townside University** is a medium size but growing state university with 15,000 full time and part-time students. It had definite aspirations to develop its academic and educational reputation and viewed accreditation reviews in that light. **Valley University**, a small state institution with some 3000 students, had initially had its interim report rejected five years earlier by the Middle States Higher Education Commission, had then submitted an acceptable report, and against that background displayed some understandable nervousness about the forthcoming review. **Fields College**, a distinguished private institution with under 1500 students, while preparing a traditional self-study report, did so in the knowledge - shared from the outset with Middle States - that it had engaged in recent years in some 20 major internal evaluations of its programmes and procedures (including curriculum, international studies, minority student recruitment and science in a liberal arts college).

These stances are indicative of the different approaches taken by institutions towards accreditation reviews. Many institutions have established strategic planning processes whose outcomes are acceptable to the regional bodies as alternatives to specially produced self-study reports. Some institutions submit regular annual updates in order to minimise the scale of the self-study required for the decennial review.

How an institution prepares for reaccreditation, therefore, depends on its record in the self-monitoring, self-evaluation process, and on its ability to negotiate an appropriate procedure with the accreditation body. Preparations for a Middle States visit vary widely in style and length, depending partly on the mesh between accreditation preparations and other forms of institutional planning and evaluation, and also on the cycle of other review requirements. Institutions may, for example, use data and evaluation reports for the state programme review as a contribution to self-study for institutional accreditation purposes.

Preparing an institution's self-study

Once the early arrangements and negotiations for a visit have been initiated, the first public act within the institution is normally the designation - most commonly by the president - of someone to chair the committee that will be responsible for preparing the institution-wide or other form of self-study. At **Townside University**, the chair of the steering committee was appointed in the spring of 1987, and the visit took place in early 1989. Two years also elapsed at **Midtown** between the designation of two co-chairs of the 'task force' and the Middle States visit (too long a period in the institution's view, as data soon become obsolete). At **Fields**, the steering committee chair was appointed in May 1988, with little opportunity for action until September. With wide and intensive involvement by

faculty and students, draft reports were prepared, and by December a final report was already being drafted, with the review visit taking place less than a year after the appointment of the chair.

Steering committees vary in size (for example, 12 at **Valley**, 17 at **Townside**), their composition varies (depending on the internal forms of nomination, negotiation or election), they reflect a range of the institution's constituencies (including faculty, administration and students), and they often establish a variety of sub-committees. The institution provides secretarial and other support, and committees have access to its data, and may have institution staff (in institutional research or planning, for example) in attendance. The committee sets out guidelines for the review process, the sub-groups conduct the reviews and submit reports, and a composite report is drafted (Middle States stipulates a maximum of about 100 pages). The report is discussed in the committee and across the institution. The president is finally responsible for transmitting the report to the institution's trustees and on to the visiting team. Although the president may make suggestions and comments, the assumption within institutions (and shared by the presidents themselves) is that it is unwise for a president to modify the substance of a committee's final report.

The nature and success of the self-study process depend on several factors in the way in which it is launched. Firstly, a successful self-study is integrated with the accreditation process: this, in turn, calls for collaborative negotiation over the content of the review between an institution and its accreditation body. At **Midtown**, 'Middle States acceptance of the form of self-study was crucial' (Steering Committee chair). At **Fields**, an initial meeting between the President and the Middle States Director reviewed previous internal studies and discussed how the experience of those studies and the accreditation process could be 'tied together in the most useful way' (Middle States Director). Secondly, the chair of the

steering committee is normally an active, respected member of faculty, not necessarily experienced in accreditation, and has a critical role in establishing participative, though critical, procedures in the committee and across the institution. Thirdly, the committee itself will be representative enough to be able to address the range of issues at stake, and obtain a global, critical view of the institution. Fourthly, the president and senior administrators set the tone of institutional commitment to the process. This commitment has to counteract any lethargy or resistance to the pressure for self-evaluation. Fifthly, the committee issues clear instructions, for example, as to the procedures to be followed, the questions to be addressed, the data to be collected, and the reporting formats to be adopted.

The product of the self-study process is a report that is scrutinised by the visiting team, and forms the basis for investigation and interaction during the visit. A typical comprehensive report reflects the institution's mission and its means of accomplishing it. It indicates strengths and concerns, as perceived by the institution. It describes and analyses academic programmes and support services, faculty, student admissions and retention, student services, research, governance and administration, finances, plant and other resources, recent changes and current plans and external relations.

How self-critical such reports are is a function of the process that produces them. Failure to be self-aware and self-critical may be damaging for the institution: the worst scenario is for a visiting team to detect a serious difference between what is reported and the reality it perceives. Common critical comments in American institutions (whose self-studies are often made public) relate to resource distribution (often supporting sport and athletics at the expense of academic provision), inadequate staffing, insufficient support for minority students, or accommodation difficulties. The self-study is often seen by an

institution as an opportunity to expose weaknesses in order to exert pressure on those responsible for taking action. At **Valley**, the report of a questionnaire to all faculty indicated low morale and some of the factors influencing it. How honestly an institution can conduct the review and present the findings is seen as a key measure of its level of maturity.

Self-studies are both historical and future-oriented, the latter particularly so when an institution focuses on a specific group of issues. In this case, a review of policies, resources and practices has the main aim of considering what the institution might do, for example, about the recruitment of ethnic minority or women faculty, attracting support for research, or improving undergraduate teaching and learning. Basic data about the institution are also presented to justify proposed priorities (such as the balance between undergraduate and postgraduate work, criteria for appointments and promotion or student recruitment policies). Recommendations by the institution are an invariable feature of the reports.

Institutions view their self-studies differently, depending on their own self-image and their recent interactions with their accrediting body. **Midtown**, in the words of its Provost, was 'not concerned about the outcome of accreditation'; it would be 'strange if the University was not accepted'. In spite of its nervousness, **Valley** produced a confident report, after wide circulation and discussion. As an institution developing in size and reputation, **Townside's** final report reflected a preoccupation with recent problems of change - including new programmes and an increased emphasis on scholarship and research. **Fields** published the committee's draft reports in its student newspaper, having had more student participation in the self-study process than the other three institutions. However, student participation was everywhere highly valued, though it was often difficult to secure regular student attendance.

The visit

The person assigned to the chair of the visiting team by Middle States is selected from another state and is likely to be - though not necessarily - the president of a similar kind of institution. The chair and Middle States then agree proposals for the other members of the review team, the institution having only limited grounds for suggesting changes, for example, to cover an additional field or if there is some objection to one of the proposed members. Teams vary in size but 12-20 is typical.

The team members who visited **Townside** were all from outside the state - including one from a region other than Middle States - and were collectively familiar with a range of academic programmes, administration, and student and academic services. The team began its work (as is normal) on a Sunday evening and completed it with an oral report to a meeting of senior staff, the steering committee and others on the Wednesday lunchtime (the format of the final meeting is left to the president).

During the visit, the team held meetings with the steering committee and faculty senate, held open sessions for students (over 40 attended) and faculty (over 30 took part). The chair having proposed an allocation of responsibilities for team members before arrival, these were approved and on the first morning each member discussed with the chair of Townside's steering committee the private meetings they wished to be arranged (for example, with the president, vice-president, deans, chair or members of particular departments, security personnel, or library staff) and an intensive day's discussions around the campus followed. At an evening meeting, the team shared impressions and concerns, and further meetings to follow up concerns were planned for the following day. Lunches were taken in the student canteen, where some conflict of view (for example, over enrolment practices) between students and administrators was identified.

Team members read and made extensive use of the additional documentation, requested further information, visited parts of the campus, and again met to share reactions and then spent much of the night and early morning drafting individual reports. These were handed to the chair on the final morning, and were discussed and formed the basis of the chair's 'exit report' to the university (when only points of accuracy could be raised, and in fact there were none). Subsequently, the chair (as is regular practice) compiled the written report, submitted it to team members for approval and to the institution for comment on its factual accuracy, and then to Middle States.

Judgements by institutions on the value and appropriateness of the whole process vary not only between institutions but also within institutions. **Midtown's** senior administrators did 'not expect to learn a lot' from the visiting team, but believed the system of voluntary accreditation to be important and were committed to it. **Townside's** president was experienced in accreditation and communicated that commitment to the institution, which in general treated accreditation as a positive part of its culture. **Valley** was less prepared than the others for the demands of the process and had to combat more lethargy. Few of its faculty saw Middle States' review as helpful to the ongoing life of the university. Of the four institutions, Valley most 'needed' a good accreditation outcome for the sake of its reputation with the state's office of higher education, and of its recruitment.

Field did not need, and everyone was aware it did not need, accreditation at all. As a high-status private institution, its enrolment was secure. It was committed to regular outside evaluation of its work, and saw accreditation as just another version of that. Like **Midtown**, Field felt that in seeing accreditation as one mechanism for ensuring standards in higher education, it needed to show its serious commitment to the operation of the system.

The content and style of the interchange during visits varied across institutions. In two full and two half days at **Townside**, with a hundred or so discussions with individuals taking place (in addition to the larger meetings), the visitors' penetration of the life of the institution was far-reaching. This is not necessarily the case, as levels of mystification or evasion may occur. However, in most cases, the Middle States accreditation process produces a significant encounter through which the components of an institution's standards become highly visible.

The wider work of the accreditation body

Middle States maintains a careful oversight of the quality of its own processes. Much emphasis is placed, for example, on the way in which the team chair carries out the roles involved. The validity of judgements based on the accreditation criteria shape the institution's and the commission's accountability to the public, 'and the work of the Chair is central to ensuring this validity'.[7] The active file of participants in the Commission's evaluation and consultative activities contains some 2,000 people, recommended by institutions, colleagues, commission members and staff. The file is annually reviewed and updated by the Commission, which issues a handbook for evaluation team members, and runs training programmes for potential team chairs and others. Team chairs are asked to evaluate the performance of their team members, and institutions visited are asked to evaluate the team chair.

The Commission has various kinds of relationship with other bodies involved in the monitoring, control and accountability process, including representation on the board of COPA. It has frequent contact with state departments responsible for 'public' institutions of higher education. It holds annual joint staff meetings with state education departments, and states are invited to send a staff person to accompany Middle States review

team visits to their institutions, to listen and to enquire but not to contribute to the report or the recommendations.

In 1979, Middle States began an experiment in joint evaluation visits with the Maryland State board of higher education, given their shared interests and 'in order to avoid duplication and imposing undue burdens'.[8] The move was not without resistant initial reaction from institutions, but with sensitivity from Middle States and the state board the process settled into place,[9] finally fitting into a general scheme of state representatives accompanying rather than sharing Middle States visits. There is contact between Middle States and the appropriate state department when an institution is in difficulty, with information flowing both ways.

It is made clear to institutions that information may go to the state but in such a way that the integrity of the Commission's relationships with institutions is maintained. It is Commission policy to submit a visiting team report only to the institution, which decides whether to transmit it to the state agency. In the process of sharing information, the Commission exerts 'every effort to protect its confidential relationship with accredited and candidate institutions'.[10]

The 'educational' role of Middle States extends not only to advising institutions and training for team chairs and members, but also to bringing institutions together in the interests of quality assurance generally. Its workshops and meetings are often over-subscribed. The annual conference is a key event. A once wide-ranging annual volume of conference proceedings has been discontinued, but there are other forms of dissemination of information (the North Central Association publishes a regular Quarterly which reports on experience in other regions and discusses issues relating to accreditation).

The amount of institutional criticism of Middle States or other regional accreditation bodies is small, and the focus of institutional discontent tends to be on aspects of professional accreditation.

3: PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION

Three professions as case studies

Nursing, engineering and **teacher education** were chosen for this study from the 40 or so areas of professional accreditation on the grounds that they are long established, and nationally and regionally important, as well as covering both public and private service sectors. Virtually all the programmes in US higher education in these three professional areas are validated by the relevant specialist board, the three boards being the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the National Council for Teacher Education (NCATE) and the National League for Nursing (NLN).

All three specialist accreditation bodies have a nationwide membership of small, large, public, private, single-discipline, multi-discipline, land-grant and Ivy League institutions. Each has a small number of executive and administrative officers. Member institutions and professional associations provide the majority of committee members and most of the visiting teams. State boards of education are also represented on professional accreditation bodies, but there is no federal representation.

As well as making accreditation decisions on individual programmes, accrediting bodies act as forums for discussion about changes in knowledge, technologies, supply and demand for professional services and the impact of these changes on criteria for accreditation of programmes. When curricular change is rapid, however, accreditation criteria can lag behind innovations which higher education institutions are wishing to introduce, and, indeed, the senior officers of NLN and NCATE

accepted that outmoded programmes and practices had been conserved in the recent histories of their agencies.

Accreditation criteria are not immutable, however, and changes are introduced by the responsible bodies after consultation with a wide variety of institutions. Given that the agency's quality assurance efforts are directed at individual programmes, it is feasible for an institution to put forward specific programmes for accreditation, allowing the others to 'innovate'. Where the institution itself is also the object of inspection, as with NCATE in teacher education, this liberty to innovate is curtailed.

Whereas, in teacher education, NCATE has given priority to determining its accreditation criteria, NLN was first encouraging curriculum reform in nursing and then devising criteria that matched. In engineering, ABET seemed able to maintain more of a balance between criteria and promoting curriculum reform and innovation.

NCATE procedures depend on the cooperation and quality of external professional assessors, and on a complex set of prolonged procedures. ABET's accreditation procedures are visible and accountable and take up as little time as is needed to maintain fair and thorough inspection. The diversity of contested views and plans for teacher education may be contrasted with the well defined professional issues of engineering and technology: teacher education is a politicised area, while in engineering and technology, professional concerns tend to dominate.

All three agencies devote resources to training institutional visitors, holding regular conferences to discuss accreditation issues, conducting reviews and research on the process of accreditation, and maintaining a national database of their member and applicant institutions. When state, federal or any form of public inquiry into one of the three professions is in

progress, evidence from the accreditors is sought and given high prominence. ABET and NLN are highly credible in this respect, and NCATE is becoming so.

The ease with which the public can gain information about accredited institutions and their programmes from the three agencies is another source of public credibility. However, during the process of accreditation, confidentiality is maintained between the agency and the institution. Each agency audits and evaluates its decisions through an internal committee and institutions may appeal to the agency where decisions seem unwarranted or procedures have not been conducted correctly (or to COPA should the agency's decision remain contested).

All three institutions visited for this part of the study were well known private institutions. Institutions with three or even two major professional areas of study are inevitably medium to large in size. Suburban **Longfellow University** has 7,000 students, suburban **Morley University** 11,000 and city **Conrad University** 40,000.

Engineering and Technology

Membership of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) is not restricted to accredited schools of engineering, but the majority of ABET members are accredited schools, including all the prestigious private schools, as well as small state colleges. Only graduates from accredited schools can become licensed engineers. ABET's standards are high: only 58% of applicant programmes gain accredited status. It issues a Compendium of Practices and Procedures for guidance of applicants.

The chair of each visiting team is appointed by ABET and has to have at least three years of full visiting experience, and he/she selects two or more members (depending on the diversity

of specialisms in the programme) for a visit lasting between one and a half days and three days. The names of the visiting team are sent in advance by ABET to the school for information. Each member of the team is formally endorsed by the relevant specialist professional engineering society. ABET takes responsibility for the visitors to be matched to the strengths and specialities claimed by the institution. Documents for the visitors are received by ABET at least nine months before the evaluation.

At the outset of the visit, an initial meeting takes place between the visitors, the chairs of the departments and dean of the school, and the chair of the visiting team introduces the issues that the team have selected to investigate. Sessions are frank but not adversarial, as the visiting team and faculty are of equal status, and the deans and chairs of schools are anxious to avoid criticism, as even 'observations' placed on record by the visiting team can be regarded as deleterious. The programme and school are scrutinised. Staff and senior students are interviewed and a sample of ex-students' subsequent careers is examined.

A structured means of collecting information on schools of engineering is in operation. The self-evaluation questionnaire, the outlines of courses with their textbooks, and the five most recent sole author publications by each faculty member provide this detail. Examples of graded student work and their means of assessment are inspected. Visits are scheduled to give the team opportunities to see classes in operation. For the ABET Executive Director, ABET visits have a reputation for 'looking under the rug, finding out if there is anything hidden or undisclosed'.

The team divides into those who inspect the engineering and technology components, those attending to the supporting courses in science and general education and those (usually the chair) who look into faculty and finance. The chair holds a meeting

with the institution's president to ascertain the institutional support and commitment to the programme and school, ABET requiring assurances from the institution that new programmes will have the resources and faculty specified in the submission.

Individual or small groups of visitors give an outline of their conclusions to the faculty they have met, rather than to all involved at a plenary. Lunch-time is the only occasion when all participants are present.

The draft report is sent to the institution, which can respond on the grounds of accuracy and fairness. The report, with any agreed amendments, goes to the chair of the commission, and if there are unresolved differences, the visiting team's version takes precedence. At the commission meeting, a decision on accreditation is given on a two-thirds majority vote. Decisions are monitored by a 'consistency committee', which checks that schools and programmes have been treated fairly. Recommendations and decisions arising from visits where the chair is performing that role for the first time are subjected to special scrutiny.

Institutions are faced with seven different sets of standards in engineering and technology, each set defined by one of the ABET specialist boards. ABET itself wishes to achieve a set of common criteria, as medicine has done, and the Chief Executive underlined that it was desirable that major changes in the curriculum should be reflected in any general agreement on criteria. For example, from 1988, computer literacy was a new criterion for approval of all programmes. Reaching agreement on this criterion involved securing the agreement of those members who wanted to persist with calculators. ABET has also given priority to the development of curricula that integrate knowledge acquisition and skill development during the third and fourth year of undergraduate courses. A further issue involves ensuring that, in the pressure to compete for government and other funds, teaching is given sufficient thought and attention.

ABET trains its visitors. Their technical competence is attested by the professional association that nominates them to ABET. Potential visitors begin their training in workshops organised and taught by officers, the participants using a set of guidance notes written by experienced visitors. When an individual is selected for a first visit, he or she takes no part in decision-making. If an evaluation is favourable, after three visits he or she is permitted to take an active part as a visitor. ABET officers do not accompany visiting teams (although in many other professional accreditation agencies they do).

ABET tries to maintain the quality of its evaluation process by using specific criteria and ensuring compliance with them. Criteria which are not consistently met show up. Annual and ten-year databases on institutions provide both longitudinal and vertical comparisons.

Through the review process, professional schools demonstrate their accountability (a) to other ABET institutions (the Audit and Review Committee ensures internal peer criticism); (b) to industry (each college of engineering is required to have an industrial advisory committee which monitors the responsiveness of training to industrial needs; information is networked across ABET members); (c) to the reputation and status of graduates (states have different grade requirements for admission to licence; individuals can be registered in one or more states); (d) to the public (accreditation is not easy to obtain or maintain).

Some lack of confidence in ABET's quality assurance procedures arises from the growing tendency to compare the level of technological literacy in the US with that of its international competitors. Partly this situation reflects the difficulty universities have in bringing their students - with low levels of attainment in school mathematics and physics - to appropriate

standards in engineering and technology, by comparison with some other countries.

ABET was engaged in a feasibility study to move accreditation from 'base line competence' to a 'quality gradient'. In practice, this meant asking schools of engineering to design their ideal programme, and then evaluating their ability to achieve it. There has been little take-up of the idea, for fear that it might lead to a ranking of institutions.

In the view of the deans at the three schools of engineering visited, accreditation had led to a considerable uniformity of programme content, though not of pedagogy. Accredited programmes could not make rapid major changes in programme content, having to wait for the next review. Since ABET was the coordinating forum for criteria and desirable changes in programmes, rapid innovation was difficult. Instead, professional schools were encouraged more to work towards steady adjustments.

When the process of preparing for an accreditation visit begins, the designated senior member of faculty (often an assistant dean) initiates a review of student records, a check on curricula to see they meet ABET criteria, and a survey of laboratory and other resources to see that they provide the basis for meeting the curriculum specifications. Despite observations about the additional workload, the internal review is generally considered worthwhile. Documentation from each programme is collected, and a self-study report compiled.

Visiting teams always meet with senior students, and where visitors find discrepancies with academic staff's viewpoint, these are followed up. Students often provide the most valuable information in identifying a potential problem.

Each visitor or group of visitors writes a report on the area covered, with the chair giving a verbal summary of the visiting

team's views at the conclusion of the visit. Interviewees considered that the visiting teams were perceptive, thorough and fair. One commented that: 'The true quality of the school is arrived at if the visitors sniff a discrepancy they actively pursue. If faculty resist, then there is no accreditation'. One member of staff reflected that the report is 'amazingly insightful and accurate, especially given the short duration of such a visit'. The draft report may be contested but in practice this happens very little. The quality of visiting teams may vary but is rarely poor; with most visits, there is mutual learning, between the visiting team and the staff responsible for the programme under review.

Teacher Education

A major review of the procedures of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCATE) was initiated in the context of criticism from higher education institutions, teacher educators, and state administrators. Rather than drawing mainly on the 'internal' advice and judgements of faculty from education schools, NCATE now seeks the views of more 'external' reference groups, including chief state education officers, state and local school boards, and 18 speciality professional organisations.

Alongside NCATE, each state is also involved in the quality assurance of teacher education, since it is responsible for conferring a licence to teach on graduates. States may be formally recognised by NCATE, though not all states seek recognition. At present 18 state boards are recognised. An institution's programmes are exempt from the curriculum part of an NCATE review if its state board is recognised by NCATE. The extent to which states and NCATE should both review teacher education programmes is controversial, as is the 'recognition' of states by NCATE.

NCATE judges the school overall, whereas the state judges the teacher education curriculum, programme by programme. To obtain a licence to teach in the state, specific courses have to be taken and it is these rather than NCATE or the faculty viewpoint that guide the construction of the teacher education curriculum. Unlike NCATE visitors, state visitors have not been trained in inspection, evaluation and the problems of quality assurance.

As part of its reorganisation, NCATE had reduced its pool of 3000 visitors to 200, with an upper target maximum of 400. Visitors are now trained in cohorts of 20, and visiting groups include five from the trained cohorts.

Teacher education schools have to satisfy extensive NCATE 'preconditions' before the process of accreditation can take place. There is a set of 'standards, procedures and policies with which teacher education units have to comply, concerning the knowledge base for professional education', relationship to the world of practice, students, faculty, and governance and resources. Related to each standard is a detailed set of 'criteria for compliance'. Each institution complies with a 'preconditions' document followed by: an institutional self-study; the visit; a subsequent report; and a concluding decision. The first four span about eighteen months. Data such as numbers of students and of accredited programmes are sent to NCATE as routine information. Self-studies of individual programmes are sent to the appropriate professional association for critical comment.

At **Conrad**, the director of teacher education deals with the overall philosophy and the assembly of the accreditation documents, as well as managing the review schedule. In this large school of education, representatives from each teacher education programme serve on the steering committee preparing for the review. Basic registry statistics on students are supplemented by descriptions of programmes provided by their heads, who also plan and conduct the self-study.

At Morley, in preparing the data to meet the preconditions, the director of teacher education had reviewed changes in the programmes to meet the new NCATE standards, met with individuals in all the relevant departments and discussed key issues with the teacher education committees. As far as could be ascertained, 90% of the preconditions had been met. Without computerised records, the work was time consuming, at least one semester full-time having been devoted to data collation and writing.

Faculty complied with the extra work involved in preparing documents for NCATE but 'it was a lot of work which could be done more simply and does not necessarily guarantee quality. However, without NCATE accreditation there is some danger that programmes and with them faculty posts will be lost'. It was recognised, in the institutions, that accreditation provided quality assurance to parents, the institution's students, their future professional colleagues and the teaching profession in general.

In the view of the deans and directors of programmes, NCATE visitors do not obtain an adequate picture of a school. If the visiting team is well informed about national issues and adopts a flexible approach, then a mutually beneficial review and dialogue can result. However, it is not unusual for some panel members to be parochial and to be unable to see beyond their own institution's programmes and philosophy. The deans considered that the accreditation process should focus more on the quality of their staff and less on the programme as described on paper.

NCATE's frequent changes in accreditation criteria and procedures over the past ten years have made NCATE unpopular amongst professionals who want to spend their time on teaching documents. However, NCATE standards (the director of Morley accepted) did not coerce schools of education to become uniform.

Although staff believe in the total process of monitoring and review, they believe that the combination of regional, specialised and state review sometimes impedes teaching and research. For many senior staff in institutions, NCATE is marginal to their concerns. As they saw it, their accountability was to students, then to their professional schools, then to the state. As one dean put it: 'We can live without NCATE but not without New York state'.

Nursing

The mission of the National League for Nursing (NLN) is to improve the delivery of health care. The process is sustained by the League through the inspection of programmes, the public disclosure of accreditation decisions, and the publication of consumers' guides, for example, to doctoral programmes. The work of the League is directed to nurse educators and patients but not to the administrators, directors or shareholders of hospitals.

All the major nursing schools have been members of the NLN since the 1950s. Only the small community colleges are not in accreditation. Students cannot proceed to a masters or PhD degree in nursing without a first qualification from an accredited programme.

Until the early 1980s, schools would rewrite their curriculum to meet the League's accreditation criteria and were reluctant to try new things. But now, through the prompting of COPA, the NLN's criteria are more general in character and are kept under review. The current thinking in the League is critical of its earlier belief in behavioural objectives as the basis of evaluation and training, and now seeks to promote reflective practice and curriculum research. In this way, the League is seeking to change the conceptual and value basis of the nursing curriculum.

For NLN, COPA has been a constructive influence, showing the way to a system which combines diversity with a creative, systematic review and with progressive development. NLN is aware that documentation and the visit promote but cannot ensure quality, except in so far as the self-study reports are found to be accurate. Consequently, the key responsibility for quality assurance lies with the institution.

A list from which review teams are picked is compiled from nominations from deans of schools. More attention is now being given to the training of visitors. To be chair of a team first requires extensive experience as a visitor and to this is added special training provided by NLN. Although visitors are drawn widely from schools of a very different character, it is difficult for the smaller schools of nursing to release staff to serve on visiting teams.

Typically, preparing the accreditation documents for an accreditation review takes about six months. A critical self-study, in the light of the NLN criteria, is drafted by a small team and sent to each programme chair and dean for comment before inclusion in the accreditation package. In the best of such processes, every member of faculty is afforded an opportunity to make an input to a school's preparations. The school's documentation is sent to NLN about one month before the visit. On arrival, the three-person visiting team agrees on what questions to ask. The team then meets the dean and indicates the information or the meetings it is seeking. During the seven-day visit, the team assess the validity of the self-study and pursues any discrepencies.

At the conclusion of the review, a draft of the visitors' report is left with the institution, to which the school can respond. The final report and any institutional responses subsequently go to the NLN Board of review, which either confirms accreditation or defers its decision pending a response to a 'warning'. The

chair of the visiting team does not attend the board meeting but is available by telephone. The chairs of schools being accredited do attend the board.

In the Vice-President's view, reports are taken seriously by deans of even the most prestigious schools. Reports are made publicly available, and a summary of confirmed report findings is published in the League journal. Prospective students can ask whether accreditation has been achieved by a school, is on hold or withheld.

Good innovative practices (as judged by peers) are disseminated by regional councils through annual workshops, through the Journal of Nursing and Health Care, and other publications. The bi-annual NLN Council meeting is in part devoted to reviewing programmes nationwide and the Society for Research into Nursing Education publishes conference proceedings and reports. A national database is kept by the League on such matters as enrolments, faculty and student achievement. Research is commissioned by the League, including longitudinal studies of nurses' careers.

The Board is taking seriously the accusation that nurses can qualify with a commitment to ideals that are not based on real work situations. In the past, accreditation has been too concerned with programme inputs and control and too little with teaching and learning, and with the vocational realism of programmes.

Although the accreditation process is expensive, the process is highly valued by most schools as it gives an opportunity for a school to review its work, and to determine that the NLN's criteria are being met. However, the requirement that the NLN's 36 criteria be met by all programmes leads to conformity and innovation is constrained. There is a widespread feeling in institutions that the League has not sufficiently encouraged change in educational delivery, although survival as a credible professional school requires a substantial degree of curriculum development.

4: THE COUNCIL ON POSTSECONDARY ACCREDITATION

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) acts as the authoritative national voice on accreditation, partly through regular publications and partly in responding to inquiries from public organisations, including the federal government. In 1988-89, 54 major accrediting bodies and seven college and university associations were members of COPA.

With its offices in Washington, COPA has a full-time staff of six, this being fewer than most of the boards and associations. However, unlike them, COPA staff do not make regular and frequent visits to applicant institutions.

The COPA Board has five standing committees:

- Executive Committee, which acts as a finance and general purposes committee;
- Committee on Recognition, which advises on the suitability of applicant organisations;
- Committee on State Relations;
- Committee on Professional Development, responsible for activities to enhance the effectiveness of accreditating body staff;
- Nominating Committee, which reviews nominees for most places on the board of directors, and all members of the committee on recognition.

Serving on these committees are delegates from all those regional associations and specialised boards which have been recognised by COPA.

COPA sees the process of accreditation not only as one of meeting predetermined criteria but also as an opportunity for an institutional self-evaluation and a 'stimulus for improvement'.

It monitors the work of its affiliated accrediting agencies through its own review and recognition process. The agencies are required to provide annual reports to COPA, and are expected to comment on the quality of postsecondary education, as revealed in the maximum term for which the accrediting body grants accreditation, and an estimate of the number of institutions or programmes which could be eligible to apply for accreditation and the number which are accredited. Accrediting bodies are required to keep COPA informed of significant changes affecting their accrediting activity.

In the COPA review process, undertaken by its Recognition Committee, its associated organisations have to meet COPA's stated requirements. In support of their submissions, the organisations include some of their own published materials or internal documentation. These submissions are then passed to a 'reader consultant' who is not a member of the Recognition Committee and is not currently involved in accrediting activities. The reader makes a detailed analysis of the agency's response, and provides an analysis for the Committee. The consultant may make a site visit and always does so in the case of an organisation seeking recognition for the first time. The Committee then receives all the papers and designates individual members to examine the documents and the consultant's report for individual agencies. At a meeting of the Committee, the agencies' representatives can respond to questions and add comments. COPA also solicits public comment on its associations' activities but normally receives very few. The Committee's recommendations go to the organisation for comment, and then to the COPA Board for decision.

There is no recent case of recognition being withdrawn or under threat. Some organisations are clearly more 'mature' than

others, and the explicitness of the COPA provisions serves the purpose of improving the internal procedures of the accrediting bodies. On request, COPA staff will visit accrediting bodies for purposes of advice and discussion.

COPA does not have a formal arbitration system but there are cases in which conflicts have arisen in which COPA has played an important role. Several years ago, for example, there was a good deal of distress among the universities about the way in which standards were being interpreted by the American Bar Association (ABA), which provides accreditation for professional course in law. COPA organised a joint committee from the universities and representatives from the ABA to consider its accreditation activities. A resolution was obtained which led to a clarification of ABA's role and a modest rewriting of the sections of their standards that were problematic.

COPA's major role is to ensure fairness of treatment and consistency within the accreditation process and provide a public assurance that the system of accreditation is reliable. This is difficult to operate in practice, because 'standards' is an elusive concept. COPA places much emphasis on the significance of the procedures established by accrediting bodies, because it is by reference to such stated procedures that conflicts over standards can be resolved.

COPA is concerned not only with maintaining, but also with improving, standards. Improvements are discussed by COPA assemblies, but they are also an element of a 'professional development' programme, provided for those who operate the accrediting agencies. Preceding the two COPA meetings each year, a full day is used as a professional development exercise. Recent topics have included the training of panel visitors and the development of new materials and procedures in learning resources.

In 1986, an advisory panel reviewed COPA activities, discussed the strengths and weaknesses of accreditation in general,

indicated some of the weaknesses of COPA and its affiliates, and made a series of recommendations.[11] Starting from this set of recommendations, and from a report COPA also published in 1986 entitled Educational Quality and Accreditation,[12] COPA moved to strengthen its own work for quality enhancement. Acknowledging this concern, an 'initiative to improve quality' was launched by COPA, intended both to modify and improve the accreditation process, and to enhance quality in post-secondary education.

There were, and remain, issues facing COPA and its member organisations, which are widely and publicly discussed in terms of the roles, quality, weaknesses and accountability of US higher education. There has also been 'constructive ferment in American higher education, much of it understandably focused on undergraduate programmes'. Against this background, the advisory panel believed it necessary for COPA and all other partners in these educational process 'to address not so much the letter as the spirit, and the future, of the total accreditation system'.[13] COPA accepted the challenge to play a greater part in addressing the many issues involved.

5: ISSUES

This study has indicated some of the specific problems connected with the work of the accrediting bodies and the institutions to which they are responsible. The focus in this concluding section is on general issues that are alive in the institutions and accrediting bodies, but which have also received attention in the literature. Sometimes, the issues are implicit, rather than explicit, as in this summary of what (in 1983) was described as a 'uniquely American phenomenon':

> What accreditation attests to is that an institution or programme has clearly defined a set of educationally appropriate objectives, that it maintains conditions under which their achievement reasonably can be expected, that it appears in fact to be accomplishing them substantially and that it can be expected to continue to do so. The strengths and the weaknesses of accreditation are a reflection of its status as the academic 'conscience' of the educational community itself ... (it is not) an external system of examination imposed on institutions and programs to harass them.[14]

Such a definition raises many issues: for example, what objectives and achievements are to count as 'clear', 'appropriate', 'reasonable' and 'substantial'? To what extent does the academic conscience of the academic community about its own affairs lead to a rigorous or a self-defensive self-examination?

The issues become sharper when the scale and diversity of US higher education are taken into account. Any charges of rigid threshold standards, and the discouragement of innovation and quality improvement, are particularly problematic against such a background. An underlying issue for all accreditation is that of arriving at a reasonable understanding of institutional and programme reality, given this wide variation of institutional mission. A related problem is that of determining the standards against which evaluations are to be made. In turn, there are particular difficulties in making judgements about the quality and outcomes of learning, even on the evidence of programme design, institutional documentation and site visits.[15]

In listing weaknesses of accreditation (including long intervals between visits, insufficient dissemination of evaluation reports, lack of enforcement of conditions, and the problem of recruiting a panel for the accreditation process), Arnstein concluded by drawing attention to 'the massive problem' of the 'inadequate knowledge of institutional and programme evaluation'.[16] In other words, despite its century-old presence in the system, insufficient is understood about processes relevant to accreditation. Accrediting bodies have, therefore, devoted much effort both to the ways in which their procedures are structured, and to research and discussion of issues of evaluation. They have done so in response to an increasing national emphasis on the assessment of outcomes in higher education rather than on the analysis of processes. By the late 1980s, assessment of outcomes was a clarion call in many states:

> Some of these calls were prompted by a number of recent critical reports on the undergraduate experience, but more and more they come form outside the academy ... the symbolism of assessment increasingly has moved from instructional improvement to institutional accountability.[17]

As Kirkwood pointed out at the beginning of the 1980s, however, an approach to process or outcomes could be a false dichotomy.[18] Partly, this distrust of the emphasis on 'process' had arisen from a dissatisfaction with institutional self-studies. One analysis at the end of the 1970s indicated the strengths of the self-study process in most of institutions, but also the weaknesses:

> At 14 per cent of the 208 responding institutions, broad commitment to conducting the study for institutional purposes was seen to be missing ... At 13 per cent of the institutions, the participation achieved was never really adequate ... At 16 per cent of the institutions, consensus on problems was never achieved ... At 14 per cent of the institutions, problem solving was not initiated and neither did significant improvement result from the study.[19]

The view from one university was that self-studies were often 'ritualistic chores'.[20] A handbook on Self-Study Processes talked of them as 'burdensome, descriptive, mechanical efforts, largely unrelated both to the real problems and to the major successes and opportunities of the institution or program in question'. They were not yet seen 'as a central process of ongoing improvement and change in most American institutions'.[21] An outcome of a current trend towards strategic planning in institutions, however, has been an improved link between the self-study and the accreditation process.

On the weaknesses of accreditation in general, in 1986, COPA underlined what it considered to be four valid 'general criticisms'. Firstly, accreditation was too often based on 'minimal statistical standards without an insistence on higher quality'. Second, it had often been observed that accreditation, particularly by representatives of specialised

professional and occupational programmes, was self-serving:

> Either the specialised accrediting body is perceived as promoting a self-protective system to control a market in one way or another, or it is believed that the specialised programmes in our nation's colleges and universities are in league with their professional colleagues from the national profession in a back-scratching kind of relationship.

Third, accreditation focused at times too narrowly on a programme without regard to 'the total educational context and mission' of the institution. Finally, 'too many college and university presidents have ignored the process and the potential of accreditation ... they have found other priorities more compelling for their personal and institutional agenda'.[22]

From within and outside their own ranks, the regional accrediting bodies have had to face specific issues concerning institutional accreditation. At its 1981 convention, Middle States heard criticism of variation in standards within and between regions, weaknesses stemming from the abandonment of 'objective indices' in the 1930s, failure to take responsibility for off-campus operations, an application of standards and criteria which had no basis in research or theory and a system of peer evaluation by 'a clubby elite'.[23] Later criticisms have focused on the expense of the operation,[24] the crudity of a process based on institutions' definition of their own mission,[25] the prolixity of self-studies, and an unwillingness to make tough decisions.[26]

Many of the issues concerning specialised, professional accreditation have been similar, but the relationship between certain professions and the programmes which prepare for them has also raised other issues. Given the range of professional accrediting bodies, we examined the 1980s literature of accreditation not only in engineering, nursing and teacher education but also in some other fields, notably librarianship,

journalism and mass communication, and speech communication. In all these fields, there has been frequent reference to the accreditation procedure being cumbersome and time-consuming, expensive, distracting from other professional concerns, operating standards that were too low, with wrong emphases, too much reliance on statistics, teams operating variable standards amongst programmes, often resulting in smugness, 'routinization' and inconsistency, the confirmation of self-interest and outcomes dependent on the whim of participants.[27]

The dean of a school of library and information science in a major state university, for example, wrote in 1983:

> Does the accreditation process work? There is at least some argument that it does not, and that argument comes as strongly from fields outside library science, particularly in the other professional disciplines.

Most of the members of a visiting team may be known personally to at least some of the faculty, 'and in many cases we are talking about close friends, colleagues, and sympathetic fellow sufferers'. It was not a question of conscious bias, but rather of an understandable attempt to be sensitive to the problems faced by institutions:

> However, the accreditation process for library education as of other education is flawed by self-adjusting subjectivity, by the desire to be compassionate, and by procedures which, in some twist of legal logic, consider applicants to be accreditable unless the evaluators can prove, and then defend, that the program is not up to standards which are fuzzily defined.[28]

Another critic pointed to accreditation being withdrawn from three university library schools in 1976, and then restored three years later on variable evidence of change, in some cases 'negative change', in the programmes concerned.[29]

In one research study, it was found that 'the more that chief executive officers and deans know about specialized accreditation, the less they want it on their campus'.[30] A writer in Chemical Engineering Education, arguing in support of dynamic accreditation criteria, agreed that 'some university administrators would be delighted to see accreditation disappear. Who needs those interlopers putting more heat on for scarce resources for their favourite discipline?[31] 'A study of the politics of accreditation demonstrated that specialised accreditation, in judging single programmes as a means of preparing practitioners, was 'by its nature ... oriented towards the interests of the profession. As a result, institutions object that some specialized accrediting groups attempt to dictate curricula and seek special privilege'.[32]

A Carnegie report also identified the range of professional associations which use the accrediting process 'to impose unreasonable and restrictive standards on the campuses', as well as on licensing by state governments. Such accreditation, turned the campus into 'a holding company for special interests ... (and) the integrity of higher education is violated by pressure from within'.[33] The Chancellor of one of the University of California campuses made a similar emphatic attack on specialised accreditation as 'advocacy for a particular discipline, often in conflict with more general objectives of the institution'.[34]

Specialised accreditation, therefore, like institutional accreditation, has had to face issues of its conservative and innovative functions, its relationship to change in the curriculum, the adequacy of criteria and their coherent implementation by visiting teams, and possible conflict between the interests of the profession and of the institution.

An increasingly prominent issue in the 1980s was the articulation of accreditation with the licensing and monitoring roles of the states. As we have seen, organisations like NCATE have had to confront questions of overlap with state departments of education, and to seek a measure of coordination. They have also encountered the problem of accrediting programmes which are being radically altered in response to state policies, in ways which may fail to meet the accrediting standards. Some states have considered replacing what they have seen as cumbersome, expensive and ineffective accreditation procedures with their own forms of accreditation, although in general states have preferred partnership with the accrediting bodies.

Programme review by state higher education departments is the area in which the greatest possibility of duplication has arisen. With demands in the late 1980s for outcomes assessment to provide guarantees of student learning, accrediting bodies have increasingly looked at the validity of student outcome studies, but so also have the states. The most notable development in this connection was described in 1987 as being the 'seizure of the "high ground" of assessment by external agencies and authorities, mostly by state government', during the previous year.[35] Individual states, the Education Commission of the States and the National Governors' Association had in that period considered or adopted policies involving the assessment of college level student outcomes. The accreditors were not alone in the field of quality assurance.

The issue which in general underlies all accreditation procedures has been that of providing a public assurance of quality in higher education. The operation of the procedures was always, from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, aimed at the practices of higher education together with the public uses to which its judgements would be put. These public dimensions have, however, become more wide-ranging and complex. The federal government has used the outcomes of accreditation as a basis for some of its financial inputs to higher education.

At the same time, it has looked to see whether accreditation is being conducted effectively enough to make government regulation of the system unnecessary.

Accreditation information has also been of use to others, including prospective students, employers, and the general public. The uses of accreditation have grown,[36] and the concomitant pressures on it have increased. The public visibility of accreditation has been one of its strengths. This has meant, however, a heightened need to be responsive to changing conditions both in higher education and in the constituencies and communities it serves.

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Appendix

FURTHER INFORMATION

A useful pamphlet-size introduction to accreditation in the US is Fred F Harcleroad, Accreditation: History, process and problems, American Association for Higher Education (AAHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report no. 6, 1980). A book which not only discusses a broad range of aspects of accreditation but also contains useful information is Kenneth E Young et al., Understanding Accreditation, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1983. It contains (pp. 407-14) the names and addresses of accrediting bodies recognised by COPA. COPA itself also produces a free publication entitled The Balance Wheel for Accreditation, which, being an annual directory, lists up-to-date details of its own structure, and of its associated professional and regional bodies.

The address of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation is:

One Dupont Circle, N.W. Suite 305 Washington, D.C. 20036
(telephone: (202) 452-1433)

COPA's publications are listed in The Balance Wheel of Accreditation.